

Evaluation of Los Angeles County's Upfront Family Finding Pilot

Executive Summary

Overview

Nationally, child welfare agencies remove more than 250,000 children from their homes each year as the result of abuse or neglect, and more than 400,000 children and youth are in out-of-home care at any time. Over the past two decades, child welfare agencies have strived to identify and engage relatives with whom children can be placed or maintain close family connections during their time in foster care. Many agencies have implemented relative search and engagement interventions, often referred to as family finding.

Prior to the Upfront Family Finding (UFF) pilot, Los Angeles County's Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) focused its family finding efforts on children in care for long periods of time. With the UFF pilot, which started in October 2016, two local offices (Glendora and Santa Fe Springs) conducted family finding when children were first removed from their home, assigning cases to specialized workers who were part of the Permanency Partners Program (P3). P3 workers served children not initially placed with relatives, but the importance of family finding was emphasized to all staff in the pilot offices. The evaluation of the pilot sought to understand whether UFF resulted in more children placed with relatives, more stable relative placements, and more timely reunifications of children with their parents.

Program Findings

- The UFF pilot was implemented as intended, and office culture shifted toward a more positive perception of relatives as resources for children removed from their homes.
- An average of 17 relatives were found for children new to out-of-home care; all but 2 of the 417 children served by P3 workers during the study period had at least one relative identified (see Table 1 for more detail).
- Sixty percent of children served had at least one relative interested in providing a placement for the child, and approximately 80 percent had at least one relative interested in visits or phone calls.
- More maternal than paternal relatives were identified, with non-relative extended family members (NREFMs),¹ making up the smallest share of relatives discovered. Identified NREFMs, however, had a higher likelihood of offering support, presumably because these individuals, who are not kin, must already be involved in the child's life to be discovered.

¹ DCFS includes non-relative extended family members (NREFMs) in its family findings efforts. Examples of NREFMs include teachers, medical professionals, neighbors, and family friends. For the purposes of this study, placements with NREFMs were counted as relative placements and the term "relative" in this summary includes both kin and NREFMs, unless NREFMs are explicitly identified.

Study Methodology

The evaluation of the UFF pilot included implementation and outcome studies. The goals were to:

- *Describe the program* and identify any successes or barriers to inform expansion of the program to all local offices.
- *Examine relative identification and engagement outcomes* for children served by P3 workers.
- *Measure the program's effect* on relative placement, placement stability, and reunification outcomes for all newly detained children and the subgroup of those not initially placed with relatives.

- Relatives were interested in supporting children across all age groups, although relatives' willingness to take placement decreased as the child's age increased.

Table 1. Relatives identified and placement outcomes for children served by P3 program

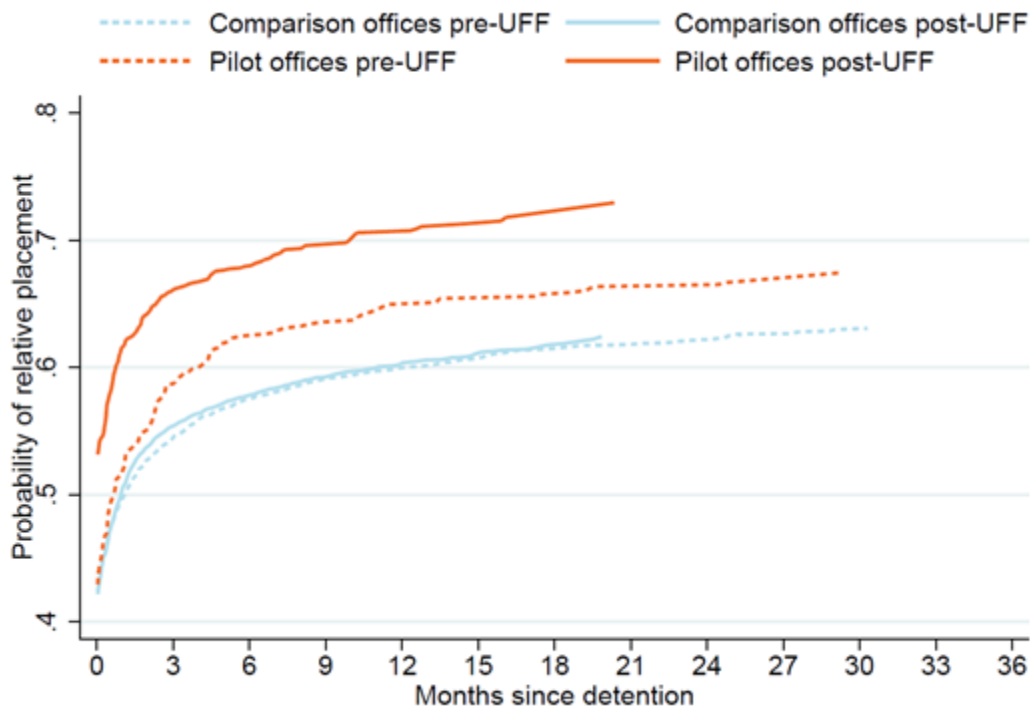
	Both Offices		Glendora		Santa Fe Springs	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Children served by P3 program (closed cases)	417	--	228	--	189	--
Total relatives identified	6,962	--	3,605	--	3,357	--
Number of relatives known at time of transfer from P3						
0	2	<1%	1	<1%	1	1%
1-10	114	27%	67	29%	47	25%
11-20	179	43%	101	44%	78	41%
21+	122	29%	59	26%	63	33%
Average	17		16		18	
Median	14		14		15	
Range	0-56		0-56		0-48	
Placed with a relative while assigned to P3	155	37%	84	37%	71	38%
Placement status at time of transfer from P3						
Relative home	91	22%	43	19%	48	25%
NREFM home	29	7%	18	8%	11	6%
Home of parent	58	14%	43	19%	15	8%
Foster family home	199	48%	108	47%	91	48%
Group home	24	6%	11	5%	13	7%
Other	13	3%	5	2%	8	4%
Unknown	3	<1%	0	0	3	2%



Outcome Findings

- Analyses suggest that UFF increased the probability of relative placement (see Figure 1). Relative placements increased by the same magnitude in both pilot offices—one with a history of high rates of relative placement and one with rates of relative placement more closely aligned with other local offices prior to UFF.
- An increase in the rate of relative placement was achieved for all newly detained children as well as for children not initially placed with relatives; however, with smaller sample sizes, we were unable to confirm that the increase was statistically significant in the sample limited to children not initially placed with relatives.

Figure 1. Probability of relative placement over time, Glendora and Santa Fe Springs pre- and post-UFF, all newly detained children



- Findings suggest that, in the Glendora office, UFF increased the probability that a child's first relative placement would disrupt (i.e. the child would leave the placement for another foster care placement). However, disruptions were comparatively rare in Glendora before the pilot; thus, even with the increase, the occurrence of relative placement disruption in Glendora after UFF was similar to that of Santa Fe Springs, as well as to the average across DCFS offices that did not implement UFF. With more emphasis on relative placement, it is possible that there are more opportunities for unsuccessful relative placements.
- To account for the fact that some relative placement disruptions represent moves to another relative, a second disruption analysis counted moves only from a relative to a non-relative. There was no evidence overall that UFF increased these types of moves—an increase in Glendora was offset by a decrease in Santa Fe Springs when examining disruptions to non-relative placement.

Table 2. Summary of statistically significant findings

	All newly detained children	Newly detained children not initially placed with relatives
	<i>Pilot offices vs. comparison offices</i>	<i>Pilot offices vs. comparison offices</i>
Relative/NREFM placement	Increase	None
Reunification	None	None
Relative/NREFM placement disruption (to any placement)	Increase	Increase
Relative/NREFM placement disruption (to a non-relative placement)	None	None

Implications and Recommendations

- The UFF pilot program met its goal of increasing relative placements and engaging more relatives to provide support to children. The program led to greater emphasis on identifying relatives for placement and other supports, and the results suggest that children’s likelihood of being placed with relatives increased.
- Both pilot offices—one with a history of high rates of relative placement and one more closely aligned with other local offices—experienced gains in relative placement.
- As DCFS expands UFF to other local offices, administrators should consider increased and more timely supports to ensure that relative placements are maintained, and that efforts towards reunification (when appropriate) are not diminished. Although inconsistent across offices and subgroups of children, some findings suggest that UFF may increase relative placement disruption and slow efforts to reunify children with their families.

Prioritizing the identification and engagement of relatives at the initial stages of a case encouraged caseworkers to think creatively about how to engage relatives and what types of support relatives can provide to the child. The specialized workers were able to engage relatives and build rapport with families; this progress will serve to strengthen the relationship between local DCFS offices and the communities they serve, benefitting all children and families.